

## [Interview with a Filmmaker: Greg Hemmings' Documentary Style](#)

by **Ibarionex Perello**

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For Greg Hemmings, filmmaking is all about the story. Whether he's filming a television documentary on a music education program for youth in Venezuela, a reality series that follows office workers on their journey to becoming professional Mixed Martial Arts fighters, or even a wedding, he knows there's a tale to tell.

As a founding member of [Hemmings House](#), a Canadian multimedia production company, Hemmings has led a group of photographers, filmmakers, videographers, audio engineers and editors to build one of the most successful media production companies in the country.

During a recent conversation, Hemmings shared not only the importance of digital capture to the look and feel of his team's productions, but also why a documentary sensibility is so important to producing great content.

### **Ibarionex Perello: How did you get started as a filmmaker?**

Greg Hemmings: When I started my business, we were shooting music festivals. And for me—I'm a musician as well—the rhythm of live concert filmmaking really grooved well with being a video editor. When you are editing footage tied to the beat of the drum or the bass, it's a lot of fun. And if you are a musician and an editor, it goes hand-in-hand so well. I've gotten some sweet contracts, and over the years we shot well over 2,000 hours of live rock and roll, and jazz performances. That's how we got our start, completely rooted in the music scene. From there we sprouted out to commercial and corporate videos, and eventually into documentaries and television shows.



*[The Bay to Beijing](#) from [Hemmings House](#) on [Vimeo](#).*

**IP: One of the great things about the HD-DSLR revolution is how wedding and events videography now has the production values of a short or even feature-length film. Do you believe that's true?**

GH: Yes, for those of us who like the look of film, we were always disappointed with video, even with the nicest HD video that we spent so much money on. That warmth and beauty that we got with film was just not there in video. We would always try to find ways to degrade video, to make it look like film, and so when the HD-DSLRs started to come out, everything changed for us. It wasn't a question of resolution; it was a question of warmth as well as great control over depth of field. It was something that we never had before. Now, we could suddenly use Nikon D90s, which were our first HD-DSLRs, and eventually the Canon 5Ds. It changed that whole aesthetic that really became part of our brand. We were able to make videos that looked like film.

**IP: One of the advantages we as filmmakers now enjoy is the flexibility in post-processing to affect the color, grain and sharpness with relative ease and minimal loss of image quality. But how much thought goes into the look of a project even before you've exposed one minute of footage?**

GH: It all begins in pre-production. We talk about what kind of camera we want to shoot with. If I am doing a run-and-gun documentary, I have to be fast and mobile. In places like Uganda or in Venezuela, I don't have time to set up perfect shots. I don't have the time to put on the appropriate lens or filter. We need a run-and-gun camera that we can yank over a backpack and film what we need to film. But it also has to have the esthetics of what we are looking for. So, I would rather shoot things with the RED camera with some awesome Zeiss prime lenses, but that's not realistic for that type of shoot. A 5D Mark II or III would be great on that shoot, except it doesn't have good audio, which means that I would have to have an audio person with me with a boom microphone.

**IP: Are you making a lot of assessments beyond just the visual quality of the footage?**

GH: We'll typically have sessions to discuss what kind of film it's going to be, the look we want, and the risk associated with respect to time to get the setup the way we want. What we found was that there is a nice little hybrid camera called the Sony NEX-FS700, which is a regular HD video camera but it has the same 35mm-size chip as an HD-DSLR. And it's got the same ergonomics of a video camera, which is fantastic. It gives great sound, great picture. It's not the best picture, but it's pretty darn good. If we're on a commercial shoot, we'll pick a camera that is in line with the esthetics that we're shooting for. For example, the great thing about the RED camera is that its 4K has so much latitude and resolution, and we have so much power shooting with it.

**IP: When it comes to unscripted documentary work, you've compared it to playing music. In what respect?**

GH: There is something wonderful about jamming, just getting with a bunch of people and the music just goes. The drummer lays down a beat or the bass player comes in and there is something in that moment that builds on itself. I think that's why I'm so drawn to documentary filmmaking, because it's all about creating something as the story unravels. That's what we love to do, be storytellers. So, when we you have the luxury to go out with no plan and you just let it happen, you can get gold. The only problem with that is that you can also come back with hundreds of hours of unedited footage that has to take shape in your editing suite, and that can take a lot of time. In my opinion, though, it's always worth it.



Hemmings' short film "[From a Broken Heart](#)" filmed with the Sony FS700 in Uganda.

**IP: When I think about the similarities between shooting documentaries and weddings, I think about the nuances, those small, telling moments that you can never predict but that are so important to the story. Is that how you approach shooting weddings?**

GH: Yes, when I shoot weddings, I always have one eye on the camera and the other eye elsewhere, because there is so much action going on. The way I shoot my weddings is similar to shooting music videos. It's all about telling the story as it happens in these cool little clips. If I'm filming two of the bridesmaids clinking their champagne glasses and out of the corner of my eye I notice that the bride is having a tearful moment, I have to be ready to capture that as well. If you don't capture that moment you might miss a pinnacle part of that day for that person. It's very analogous to how I do much larger documentaries. You are there for a purpose. You know what that purpose is. You have to always be looking through the corner of your eye, because if you are too linear and focused only on what's in front of you, you run the risk of missing the gold.

**IP: Keeping yourself open to important, candid moments is great, but what do you do to minimize this the risk of overshooting? Are you editing in your head simultaneously?**

GH: You got it. It definitely takes experience, because in my early years I would overshoot. You think you need everything. I was able to tweak my skill set because I was an editor. If you are a filmmaker or a videographer and you are also an editor, you know how frustrating it is to go through hours and hours of footage. So just for self-preservation, you'll make a choice that maybe you don't need that shot and you have to trust yourself on that. At the end of the day if you know in your head that you're going to make an 8-minute wedding video, you know that you don't need eight hours of footage. Because I'm the editor, I already know how it's going to go because I'm there live when it's happening. It's not always possible, but for the most part, if you are shooting that footage, you should also try editing it.

**IP: Do you work on an overall rough edit and revise from there?**

GH: After I bin all my footage, I have a mental picture of where I want to start. A really fun thing for me is the introduction. It might not even be the intro that gets used down the road, but I will always start with putting together a kick-ass intro—whether it’s a documentary or a wedding video—and that really gets those creative juices flowing. It sets the whole tone of the production from that point forward. I get so motivated by doing that, because the piece really begins to come together frame by frame as we are laying it down to a track with music. I get really inspired creating a groove, a real rhythm and a tone.



*A trailer from Hemmings' film [Melting Lands](#), shot in the arctic region of Nunavik.*

**IP: I think what you are ultimately saying is that videographers really have to see themselves as directors. What exactly does that entail for you?**

GH: “Director” is quite broad a term. Sometimes, the director is the person who understands the shots that are needed for a scene. Other times, the director is the one taking care of the talent. But the universal definition of a director is the grand steward of the story. That person should have a good understanding of cinematography. They should be a good editor. They should appreciate the importance of sound. So, the director has to take care of all those bits and pieces. And while it’s not a sexy job, it can definitely be a satisfying one.